DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 331 PS 017 710

AUTHOR Wardle, Francis
TITLE Interracial Families and Biracial Children: How the Child Care Program Should Respond.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Early Childhood Education; Family Characteristics; *Individual Needs; *Intermarriage; *Racial Bias; *School Responsibility; Self Concept
IDENTIFIERS *Biracial Children; *Interracial Families

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the views of an early childhood educator who is also a parent of biracial children on the following topics: interracial families, biracial children, and ways in which early childhood programs and schools should work with these families and children. Discussion focuses on mixed backgrounds, the need for and use of appropriate labels, the multiplex heritage of biracial children, their genetic heritage, society's definition of biracial children, myths about interracial parents and their children, ways of supporting biracial children in the early childhood school setting, teachers' support of biracial children, and 13 specific school and classroom activities to be used with biracial children. Educators need to be responsive to the identity needs of biracial children, and the special needs of their parents. Difficulties that hinder educators' abilities to respond to biracial children are described. Professionals who work with young children must overcome these difficulties, gain the information that is needed to destroy the myths about biracial children, and provide experiences to support biracial children's development of positive identities. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED302331

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Francis Wardle
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Interracial Families and Biracial Children: How the Child Care Program Should Respond

by

Francis Wardle, Ph.D.

Eleven years ago my first child was born. I purchased cards to announce her birth. When I handed the cards to the store clerk, she looked at the illustration of a baby on the cards, looked at me, and then said, "You've made a mistake - you don't want these cards."

I checked the cards, and replied firmly, "yes I do." The clerk wrapped the cards and handed them to me in puzzlement. The baby on the card was a cute, curly-headed, brown baby. I am a white male. My first child, Maia - like my other three children - is biracial. Before the birth of Maia, my wife and I had confronted the typical frustrations and silly questions all interracial couples experience, but we had not seriously considered how to raise biracial children.

Since that day we have read about biracial children, discussed the issue often, talked to other interracial parents, and used our knowledge in education and child development to develop an approach to raising our children. I have written several angry letters, argued on talk shows, and written many articles - for both local and national publications. I believe I have progressed to a point where I have fairly clear conclusions about interracial marriage - and, more explicitly, biracial

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PS 017710

children. My development in this area has been greatly assisted by my black wife, and by the willingness of American publications to print my material. Because I am an early childhood educator and a professional committed to support and celebrate diversity in early childhood programs and schools, I have been very concerned about the identity of biracial children and how programs should support that identity. Professionals working with interracial families also need accurate information. This paper will articulate my position on interracial families and biracial children; then it will cover ways early childhood programs and schools should work with these children and their families.

Mixed Backgrounds

Almost every person's heritage is mixed to some extent. Europe is the heart of mixtures, because armies, merchants and nomads roamed across the seas and land, producing children along the way, and geographic, cultural, and ethnic boundaries kept shifting. The Romans conquered most of Europe at one time, Moors from North Africa lived in Spain - and, after the Spanish Armada - in Scotland, Ireland and England; and the Huns raped and pillaged across Asia and Europe.

Ironically, Germany was the crossroads of tribal and national conquests across Europe.

Native Americans have mixed for centuries - both with members of other tribes, and with other non-white Americans. Non-whites who were brought to this country for

cheap labor - Chinese, Philippinos, Mexicans, etc., were not allowed to marry white Americans. Because a disproportionate amount of men were brought to this country, (for cheap labor) they married non-white Americans: blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans. People from Mexico are, of course, products of French, Spanish and Indian heritage. American blacks also have West Indian heritage - where interracial marriage was more acceptable than in the United States -, and some American blacks have white and Native American ancestry. Thus today's American minorities have rich, multi-ethnic and multi-racial heritages.

So we are all mixtures.

Why then the big deal about interracial marriage and biracial children? Clearly this attitude comes from our need to arbitrarily break the earth's population into distinctive racial groups. This obsolete idea developed from the notion that Europeans are a superior group of people, and the belief of White Americans that God had appointed them as rulers and protectors - thus the creation of divine destiny - the right of whites to conquer Native Americans. The logic of superiority requires the definition of superior and inferior groups. Once defined, one clearly cannot allow groups to mix, because that would 'contaminate' the superior group. (Virginia state lawmakers had problems here, because one of their heros, John Smith, had married an Indian - Pocahontas).

In modern America, arbitrary racial classification is perpetuated by the government: racial and ethnic categories on everything from birth certificates to school entrance forms; federal money for Native Americans, as long as they can prove a specified percentage of Native American heritage, and federal funding of social and educational programs based on the percentages of minorities who will benefit. Because of this, many minorities feel intermarriage will jeopardize their federal funding - as will a biracial category on federal forms; and other minorities believe someone who crosses racial or ethnic lines to marry is rejecting a pride in their own group.

The difference, then, between a white American of English decent marrying a white American of German decent, and a black American marrying a white American, is one created by history, laws, and government categories. In real terms the difference is one of degree. Because this difference is one of degree, and not based on any scientific facts, the definition of 'biracial' is vague and non-scientific. While the obvious definition of a biracial child is a child from one black parent and one white parent, the broader definition includes any child of mixed parentage: black/Hispanic; Native American/white; Asian/black; etc. This article will emphasize the identity and needs of children whose parents represent two distinctive cultural, racial and/or ethnic backgrounds.

What's In a Name

New groups always struggle with a name that best identifies them. In this area, at least two names are needed: one for parents who cross racial and ethnic barriers to marry, the other for children of mixed parentage. Biracial children desperately need a label to help them develop a strong identity, and to assist them in talking to insensitive children and adults. "Biracial," "interracial," "multi-racial," and "multi-ethnic" are the most common names used: I tend to use "interracial" for parents, and "biracial" or "multi-racial" for the children. The use of "brown" by young children is also good. Other people use a name that conveys the specific racial or ethnic backgrounds of both parents. The hope is eventually no word is needed, but before that time comes we might still see some name changes.

Biracial Children Do Not Have a Dual Heritage

The biggest area of dispute about biracial children is their identity. Many people, including myself, are insisting biracial children have an identity based on the collective heritage of both parents. This is not, however, a 'dual' identity. Its more than that. A child of Polish and German heritage is not considered to have a dual identity; a person of Papago and Yaqui heritage does not have a dual identity. A biracial child has a rich heritage that includes - depending on the individual child - Asian, Native American, African, West Indian, and European ancestry. A biracial child should be raised with a family

tree that includes every branch of his heritage. Dual implies two distinctive, incompatible, inseparable lines of background, and this is obviously incorrect.

The biracial child's heritage is a single unit, comprised of a rich collection of equal, varied and exciting parts.

When a biracial child marries, he will continue the process of combining heritages - regardless of the background of his spouse. White Americans have done this for centuries.

Genetic Heritage

Some of the most beautiful flowers, the hardiest farm animals, the most productive plants and the quickest growing trees are hybrids (genetic combinations). Animal breeders, flower developers, agronomists and tree biologists experiment constantly for better genetic combinations - to resist disease, increase beauty, reduce fat content, and increase speed of growth, among other goals. While I am not suggesting we breed people scientifically to produce desirable results, I am suggesting the notion of racial purity is not based on any logical or scientific information, and is a rather silly notion. Children with a mixed genetic heritage approach maximum genetic variability, which means they exhibit a vast array of genetic differences. There is some truth to what many interracial parents believe, when they declare, "biracial children are

so beautiful"; many biracial children are also very intelligent.

A biracial child can have blond hair, white skin and blue eyes, along with all other skin, hair and eye color combinations. Hair texture and physical features also differ widely. It is impossible to predict a child's physical appearance (phenotype) from the parent's heritage (genotype). And it is patently untrue that biracial children are genetically more black than white. Infact it could be argued that many are more white than black, because their black parent probably has some non-black ancestry, while their white parent probably have little black ancestry. But this clearly does not matter.

Society's Definition

"Society will define your children as black, so you should raise them as black." All interracial parents have heard this argument many, many times - especially from writers and professionals. Society once viewed Native Americans as non-citizens, women as incompetent to vote, blacks as slaves, and children as cheap labor for our factories. More and more Americans then came to view these societal views as being wrong, and they changed. We are saying society's view of the identity of biracial children is incorrect. We point to other countries that define biracial children accurately: the combinations of backgrounds that are accepted in this country (Creole, mestizo, and everyone who proudly claims some Native

American heritage) and the obvious genetic, cultural and historic combinations that make-up biracial people.

Other Myths About Interracial Parents and Their Children

Because interracial marriage has been taboo in this country for so long, there are many myths about interracial marriages and biracial children. These myths include: people who marry someone from another racial or ethnic group are perverted in some way (they marry to 'get back' at a racist society; for abnormal sexual desires, or to gain wealth and status); interracial marriages end up in divorce more often than other marriages; biracial children are more 'messed up' then other children, and minorities are more accepting of biracial children than are non-minorities.

The strongest myth about biracial children is that these children must choose the same identity as their parent of color, because black genes are stronger than white genes, society sees these children as black, therefore they are black, biracial children are discriminated against as much as minority children, so they should take on the identity of their minority parent, and all non-biracial children (minority and Anglo) have a single, uniform heritage.

Finally we have the myth that, while biracial children will receive negative comments and insults from other children and adults (and this will have a bad impact on their self-concept development) non-biracial children never have any negative comments, attitudes and behaviors

directed toward them. There is the assumption that the biracial nature of a child is an individual difference far greater than any other individual difference: handicapped, gender, gifted, etc. Therefore the negative impact of this difference will be more destructive than asocial behavior other children might experience. I think the issue is really that other children with individual differences don't choose those differences; interracial parents are essentially accused of setting up their children for failure.

Many of these myths are still accepted by much of the public, and are actively perpetuated by most professionals (sociologists, psychologists, social workers and educators).

Supporting Biracial Children in the Early Childhood School Setting

Because there has been an increase in the number of interracial relationships in this country during the past twenty years there has also been an increase of biracial children. The increase in interracial relationships is a result of the 1967 Supreme Court decision striking down state laws forbidding interracial marriages, the 1954 school desegregation decision, the increase of people from diverse backgrounds meeting in schools, colleges and the work place, a new conscientiousness coming out of the 1960's, and, in some parts of the country, more public acceptance of interracial marriage.

We do not know the exact number of biracial children, because schools, governments and the census bureau do not recognize them as a separate category.

A child's positive identity development depends on a secure sense of who they are, where they come from, and how their family, child care program and community support their identity. This sense of identity, and the recognition of physical characteristics - including skin color - being an important part of identity, begin to be formed during the early childhood years. This is why its essential child care programs and schools positively support the biracial child and the child's family.

Teachers Support of Biracial Children

A teacher's support of any individual difference in her classroom starts with her own understanding and comfort level with the difference. Does she respect the individual rights of a handicap child, without pitying him? Is she comfortable with all children sitting on her lap? Does she sincerely believe a biracial child in her classroom can be as successful as any other child? Is she sympathetic to the needs of the abused child? Teachers must explore their feelings about biracial children; they must examine whether they believe the myths outlined in this article - and, if so - whether they are open to changing those myths. If they are not, then these teachers should not work with

biracial children. It is not acceptable to say, "well, they are just children, the same as all other children."

At the initial parent-teacher conference, discuss with parents of biracial children the issue of identity. How is the child's identity viewed at home? How is that identity cultivated and supported? How do the parents want it to be supported in the classroom and school? Also determine how parents respond to negative comments directed at their children - from children and adults. What do they tell their children to say? How do they reaffirm their child's positive difference.

Interracial parents hold a variety of opinions about the identity of their children. Some say the child's racial identity does not matter, others are very confused about the whole issue, and a third group have a clear understanding of their child's biracial identity. While you need to respond to the parent's wishes in the approach they use to identify their child, you also need to support their search for a true identity.. Provide them with information about local support groups; refer them to books and articles about biracial identity, and let them know their struggle is a legitimate one.

Do not respond to them by perpetuating one of the myths, such as, "well, you know you have to choose one of his parents," or "well, ofcourse, he's black."

Specific School and Classroom Activities

There are many specific ideas that teachers can use in the classroom to support biracial children. But a positive attitude toward these children and their families must exist in the entire center. This attitude must be established by the director, - who must provide a climate that celebrates the diversity of all children and their families. Trainings, posters, staff attitudes and communication, art work, etc., will need to reflect this richness and diversity.

1) Through stories, role playing, films, photos, picture books, etc., the teacher can show her students how people in this country have effectively mixed religions, national heritages and ethnic, racial, political and linguistic differences through marriage. Use a child with English/Polish parents, or Italian/Swedish parents to show how mixtures in parentage are popular and acceptable.

2) Develop a family tree for each child in your classroom - going as far back as you can with each side of the child's family. Note the differences and origins of each child: nation, language, culture, etc. Use photos and artifacts, and encourage parent, grandparents and other relatives to come to the classroom and talk with the children.

3) Encourage and support discussions about individual differences. Children are very curious: they also are uncertain and sometimes scared of the unknown. "Why do you look different from your mommy?" "Why is your

daddy white and you're not?" "Can I touch your hair?" "Are you adopted?" Openly respond to these questions, and use the interest to talk about children getting their physical characteristics from their parents. Use both biracial and non-biracial children to make this point. This activity will naturally lead into a project on different families. Develop a bulletin board or collage showing every variety of family - foster, adoptive, two parent, single female headed family, single male headed family, interracial, extended, minority, etc. Also invite as many of these families to visit your classroom as possible.

4) Avoid curriculum materials, discussions and activities that divide the country and the world into neat, distinctive racial and ethnic groups.

This is very easy to do because young children are generalists who like to put the real world into neat categories, and because child care professionals want to expose children to the variety of ethnic and racial groups that make-up this country. We need to help children view all people by their individual strengths and weaknesses. In supporting the richness and diversity of individual differences in our classrooms, we cannot make the mistake of grouping people into groups, based on physical characteristics.

5) Provide lots of activities for mixing colors: paints, food colors, colored plastic, tissue paper, etc .

6) Provide many activities where children learn about their own physical characteristics, and learn to feel positive about those characteristics: drawing and painting pictures, making collages, viewing in the mirror, making life-size cutouts from butcher paper, and then filling in the correct flesh-tone colors.

7) Make a big poster or bulletin board showing all the people in your program (children, teachers, cooks, bus drivers, etc.) with a caption that conveys "The Beauty of All People."

8) Provide a wealth of curriculum materials throughout the year. Books, posters, dolls, bulletins, artifacts, music, stories, toys, etc., should cover a rich variety and texture of peoples - including people who have a biracial heritage. Avoid only studying Hispanics at Cinco de Mayo time; only "studying Indians" at Thanksgiving; and conveying that Native Americans are all the same.

9) Encourage biracial children to reflect on their family situation - through comments, questions, discussions, dictating stories, playing in the dress-up area, and painting pictures

10) View biracial children - and all children with individual differences - as a positive contribution to your program. They facilitate your ability to develop activities, read stories, discuss issues and work out problems, that teach children to respond positively to variety, richness, and differences.

11) Conduct several classroom activities that address the commonalty of all children in your program. Do a collage of hands, a poster of heads, have all children trace (or use as prints) their feet onto butcher paper. Do a chart of emotions all children experience: note that all children have parents, a language, clothes, etc.

12) Provide activities that illustrate the non-racial/ethnic differences between the children in your classroom: height, weight, likes, dislikes, jumping ability, hopping ability, size of foot, size of hand, parent's occupation, ball catching ability, etc.

13) Do not allow any child to say something negative to a biracial child based on the child's physical characteristics or mixed heritage (obviously you should not allow this kind of behavior toward any child in your program). Find out the real reason for the comment ("well, he stole my truck;" "she never plays fair;" etc.). If a child continues to make negative comments, respond as you would to any unacceptable classroom behavior (throwing food, fighting, etc.).

Biracial children are a new population that many child care professionals are serving. We need to be responsive to the identity needs of these children, and the needs of their parents. This is made more difficult because of myths that surround these children and their parents; of historical and societal prejudice against this population, government rules and categories that do not recognize people

of mixed heritage, and because the whole question of biracial identity has only recently been directly addressed. Professionals working with young children must overcome these prejudices in themselves, gain information to destroy the myths, then provide experiences to support the identity development of biracial children.

REFERENCES

Aldridge, D. (1978). Interracial Marriage: Empirical and Theoretical Consequences. Journal of Black Studies, 8 (3), 355-368.

Babtiste, P. (1983). Rearing the Interracial Child, Communique, December, 4-5.

Babtiste, P. (1985). The Contemporary Interracial Child, Communique, April, 1-7.

Gay, K. (1987). The Rainbow Effect - The Interracial Family. New York: Franklin Watts.

Jacobs, J. (1978). Black/White Interracial Families: Marital Process and Identity Development in Young Children. Dissertation Abstracts International, 38 (10-B) 5023.

Monahan, T.P. (1973). Marriage Across Racial Lines in Indiana. Journal of Marriage and Family, 35, 632-640.

Porterfield, E. (1978). Black and White Mixed Marriages: An Ethnographic Study. Chicago: Nelson Hall.

Poussaint, A.F. (1984). Study of Interracial Presents Positive Picture. Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, 15 (6), 9-10.

Shackford, K. (1984).Interracial Children: Growing Up Healthy in an Unhealthy Society. Interracial Books for Children Bulletin, 15 96), 4-6.

Thody, J. M. (1976). Limitations to Genetic Comparison of Populations. In: Block, N.J., and Dwokin, G. (eds), The IQ Controversy. New York: Pantheon Books.

Wardle, F. (1988). Biracial Children Rich In Heritage. Communique.

Wardle, F. (1984) Please Check One - White, Black, Other Mixed. Communique. September, 2-3.

Wardle, F. (1985). Mummy's Black, Daddy's White, and I'm Brown. Communique, 4-7.

Wardle, F. (1986). Raising a Dark White Child in Kansas City. Communique.

Wardle, F. (1987). Interracial Children. Day Care and Early Childhood Education. 15 (1), 20-22.

Wardle, F. (1987). Building Positive Images: Interracial Children and Their Families. In Neugebauer, B. (Ed), Alike and Different. WA: Exchange Press, 97-104.

Wardle, F. (1987). Are You Sensitive to Interracial Children's Special Identity Needs. Young Children. January. 53-59.

Wardle, F. (1988). Who Am I? Responding to the Child of Mixed Heritage. PTA Today. 13 (7). 7-10.

Wardle, F. (1988). Interracial and Interethnic Children: Instilling Pride in Their Rich Heritage. Growing Parent. May. 3-4.

Wardle, F. (1988). Interracial Children. Colorado s Children. 7 (2). September 4-5.

Wardle, F. (1988). Responding to Individual Differences in the Classroom Setting. Paper presented for Child Care Services, Inc., and Black/White Task Force, Shreveport, LA. November 8.

Wardle, F. (1988). Kids Benefit From Exposure to Other Cultures. Denver Parent. November 3 (3), 20.